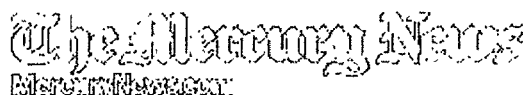




SDMS Doc ID 2015024



San Jose Mercury News (CA)

May 16, 2003

TOXIN, PROPERTY VALUES WORRY HOMEOWNERS

JOSHUA L. KWAN, *Mercury News*

Mountain View homeowners living on or near land contaminated with the industrial solvent TCE are worried the toxin could not only harm their health, but the value of their homes and property as well.

Some are concerned that the mere word "toxin" may be enough to spook prospective buyers. Others fret that the unwanted media attention about trichloroethylene -- a once-ubiquitous solvent used in cleaning microchips and machinery -- may erode the reputation of their well-kept neighborhoods.

Bruce England, a resident of the Whisman Park neighborhood, said many homeowners appreciate the role the Environmental Protection Agency is taking to guard their health by regulating the polluters. They're relieved that TCE poses no immediate dangers; and long-term risks for neurological disorders, kidney and liver cancer are relatively small.

But the spotlight on the problem comes with an unsolicited publicity that may tarnish their neighborhoods, England said.

"I wish we didn't have to worry about this part of it," said England. "I'd like to just deal with the cleanup and deal with the process openly without worrying about home values."

One homeowner, who asked not to be named, said he will slash his asking price by \$60,000, in part because he is worried about the stigma of TCE.

In south Santa Clara County, residents of Gilroy, Morgan Hill and San Martin are worried about another toxin: perchlorate, a salt used in making fireworks, jet fuel and safety flares that has been found in drinking wells. Nearly 2,000 families in those towns have been forced to rely on bottled water.

While the health risks of the perchlorate contamination in the South Bay are far more urgent than the TCE contamination in Mountain View, both communities share a concern over the possible impact on their property values.

"If you have something major that scares potential buyers, that makes the property less desirable and it affects the value," said Tori Atwell, a real estate agent who has sold homes in Mountain View for 18 years. "The only real remedy is for either the problem to go away or you adjust your price."

Time is on the side of homeowners, said Atwell. Over the years, she said, people tend to forget what once made headlines. The real estate agent cited the high demand for homes in parts of San Jose and Mountain View that just a few years ago were shunned because the homes were too close to the former Fairchild Semiconductor, which had left behind pollutants from its manufacturing days.

But thousands of homeowners in Arizona believed TCE ruined their home values. In 1994, owners of 22,000 homes and 1,500 commercial buildings joined a class-action lawsuit against Motorola and other companies that had leaked TCE into the ground. Motorola fought back, saying it had both used and later cleaned up TCE according to the best practices of the time.